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Cover: *Blockbuster*, 1997, by Dale Kennington, Dothan.  
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### From the Editor

The Spring 1997 issue of *Alabama Arts* received many compliments on its look, style and focus. We plan to continue that same look and style in future issues and to have each issue focus on a particular topic such as visual arts, folk arts, performing arts, literary arts, etc. Many thanks are extended to the writers of the following articles; their remuneration is copies of the magazine and our deep appreciation. Special thanks to Wordcraft for production assistance. *Alabama Arts Report* has been discontinued, but we still need your information as we receive many inquiries regarding performances, etc. please continue to send your press releases and other pertinent information to ASCA to my attention.

The Alabama State Council on the Arts has a number of free publications available which include *Alabama Arts*, *Alabama Touring and Presenting Directory*, and *Guide to Programs*. Please contact me if you are interested in receiving any of the above or if you would like to be placed on our mailing list. Thank you.

—Sharon Heflin, APRP

# ALABAMA ARTS

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# Finding Common Ground in Support of the Arts

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By Al Head

The arts are a means of communication, an avenue for making a statement, a way of sharing feelings or a way of interpreting the environment to each other. All of those functions have been part of the community of mankind and part of community life throughout history.

The arts are clearly the product of gifted individuals working independently or in concert with others. However, for artistic expression to come alive there must be interaction with an audience or the society as a whole. If a tree falls in an isolated forest—or an artist's work is never witnessed—where is the sound, or the art? All the arts come out of and find resonance in the community. Often we hear the term “community arts” as if that is a separate or distinct category of the arts. *All* of the arts are community arts. In some cases the community is a few people, in other cases it is many thousands. Some arts flow out of longstanding tradition while other artistic expression is at the front edge of creativity. Regardless of the diversity and peculiar dynamics inherent in the arts, the product or outcome is played out in the community.

There is no question that the community affects all artists' work. The artist is always responding to his or her environment, holding up a mirror to the time and culture. The arts tell the stories of our communities, stories that involve family, religion, work, recreation, politics, special events, places and people. Family and community traditions are kept alive through the folk arts. Folk arts by definition reflect an indigenous community culture. Folk as well as more contemporary and homogenized communities are often identified or known because of unique artistic expressions. A community might be known because of its tribal arts and crafts while another is recognized for its professional theatre. The analogy of community identity and the arts could include outdoor sculpture, festivals of all kinds, museums, writer colonies, or even film making.

The point is that the arts are a vital part of that which makes up a community and the community is a vital part of artistic expression. They are inseparable, and they both require nurturing for positive developments to occur. For the arts to be a vital part of a progressive and growing community, it is increasingly important for partnerships and collaborations to be forged. Likewise, in order for a community to be progressive and competitive in today's world of sophisticated economic development strategies, the arts and cultural resources of that community, as related to quality of life benefits, must be present.

In Alabama, community support for the arts is uneven. There are outstanding examples of communities establishing a progressive growth plan that includes a vibrant cultural environment for all citizens. When that happens local government, business, support groups such as chambers of commerce, arts organizations, and local artists have formed a working partnership that identifies both needs and opportunities for development. Unfortunately, there are communities where arts activities and cultural resources are hard to find.

It is well documented that the arts contribute to economic development, education, downtown revitalization and urban planning efforts, cultural tourism, and adaptive reuse of historic buildings. Where progress occurs, creative people are present. Creative people come out of an environment that encourages, supports and rewards creativity. A creative environment does not exist without the artists and the arts.

In order for a city or area to be attractive to new or expanding businesses, certain basic criteria must be met. These include a favorable tax base, cost efficient transportation corridors, good schools and training institutions, a capable labor force, government incentive packages and proximity to important resources. Cultural amenities are also on the list, and their significance is growing. A rich cultural life is necessary for an area to recruit top executives and keep well-paid employees happy and productive. With these kinds of interests and concerns the arts and cultural resources of a community become part of the check list of items that weigh in the final decision making of top management evaluating various location options. The arts

have been called "tie breakers" by community officials where efforts have been successful in attracting business and industry. Several years ago the Retirement Systems of Alabama, in its annual report, featured the arts in communities statewide in an attempt to highlight the state's cultural amenities. Obviously, the concept was to reflect a positive and progressive side of Alabama to potential investors in our state's economy.

The arts and the future of our communities are inseparable. Nurturing communities are essential for the growth of the arts and development of artists. The arts and artists of the state are likewise essential to the growth and positive development of communities, large and small, rural and urban and with populations reflecting all kinds of social and ethnic diversity. As a community of people, we should celebrate the arts and utilize the creative energy of artists to make all of our home towns better places to live.

**Old-time music pleases the crowd at Dothan's Landmark Park.**



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# The Arts on Main Street

by  
**MARK HUGHES COBB**

A feature writer for the Tuscaloosa News, Mark Hughes Cobb frequently focuses on the arts.

Northport, population 20,000, could easily have become a mere bedroom community for Tuscaloosa, the nearby neighbor four times its size. But the partnership of an arts organization, dedicated merchants and a visionary city plan led to revitalization of the historic downtown area and the creation of a community showplace on the banks of the Black Warrior River.

The Kentuck Association moved into buildings on the corner of Main Avenue and Fifth Street in downtown Northport about 20 years ago, adopting an abandoned gas station, leaky roofs, outdated electrical wiring and a pile of broken toilets.

"The courtyard had weeds up to your shoulder, toilets, auto parts, all manner of rubble, tin sheds that were falling down," said woodworker Craig Nutt, one of the original Kentuck studio artists. "This corner was really pretty awful. I must have been desperate for my own studio." Kentuck founder Georgine Clarke, now with the Alabama State Council on the Arts, concurs: "In those days, except for places like City

Cafe and Anders Hardware—key stores with their own clientele—it was desolate down there."

Now the Kentuck Association has beautified its corner—turning the toilet repository into a miniature Eden with verdant landscaping, sculpture, a blacksmith's forge and artist's barn. The association operates a gift shop and museum annex on the corner, along with artists' studios. Through its own growth, Kentuck has urged downtown Northport to flower. And that is exactly what has happened.

"We located the art center there to provide a hub to attract other people," said Kathy Bailey, former Kentuck information director, now director of the Evans Memorial Library and Museum in Aberdeen, Mississippi. "Kentuck complements the other businesses that have been down there for a long time."

## Businesses Booming Downtown

"Eclecticism ties the area's thriving concerns," said Jeff Wilson, co-owner of The Globe restaurant and president of the Downtown Northport Merchants Association. "We're trying to become a substantial business district—not so much a downtown with just one theme, but a lot of different ideas," Wilson said. "Everybody down here is unique; that's why they've made it."

In addition to The Globe, the newer businesses in downtown Northport include The Potager, outdoor and garden specialties; Adams Antiques; The Renaissance Gallery; Penage, interior decorating; The Duck Horn, hunting-



**Casual landscaping and park benches welcome the visitors to Northport.**





**Rocking chairs set the pace for a courtyard.**

and fishing-themed collectibles; and Hummer's, fine food and catering.

Older businesses such as the Northport Barber Shop, Anders Hardware, Faucett's, women's clothing, and the City Cafe, a basic breakfast/meat and three vegetables eatery, are also enjoying the rebirth of the center of a city that celebrated its 125th birthday in 1996.

"I think Kentuck was the catalyst for all the stuff in downtown Northport," Nutt said. "Kentuck has taken what was a blighted corner and turned it into an asset."

Harriet Adams of the Potager, a former Kentuck Association president, credits the Kentuck Center and festival with attracting the attention of artists and other creative folk who have had a great influence in the downtown renaissance. "This area just has a wonderful feel to it," she said. "It has a very small town kind of atmosphere—a neighborhood feeling. And it's fun to be down here."

"Kentuck created a different atmosphere down here, added an artistic element that gave new life," Nutt said. "People come here from all over the country, all over the world, and I hear them say it: they've never seen anything like it. It's a dynamic, creative place."

"It's certainly a partnership between businesses that are related," Clarke said, "so you can develop a clientele which is interested in the arts, interested in unique things, and interested in the strength of southern heritage."

### **A Planned Renaissance**

All of downtown is now under the spell of the Renaissance Plan, which has so far seen upgrading and repaving of the short Main Avenue stretch, and which calls for further development down to the historic river area. Last winter a facelift of the downtown sidewalks and streets was completed, with level brick pavers, willow oaks in parking islands, new parking spaces, and water lines and drainage

systems installed. Other touches that have been added since are antique decorative light poles and brick park benches.

Goals not yet realized include a flood-control levee, an entertainment amphitheater, visitor's center and river history museum.

"It has a great deal of value to us to be publicly included in the Renaissance district," said Kentuck Association vice president Janet Teer.

### **Studios Still Brighten the Corner**

The complex of buildings at the Kentuck Art Center includes gallery/exhibition space, a museum gift shop and administrative offices. Most activity centers around seven professional artists' studios. The studio area provides solitary spaces for the serious making of art, but also provides support for the artists and a community atmosphere.

The newest occupant of the space will probably be Marc Rigsby, a ceramist and recent MFA graduate of the University of Alabama, said Miah Michaelson, Kentuck executive director.



**The Kentuck Association's gallery and museum annex is a focal point of the rehabilitated downtown.**

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*Clarke referred to a speech by former University of Alabama president David Matthews, who spoke of the value of Northport, a small town abutting the larger university town of Tuscaloosa.*

*"He encouraged us to preserve not the past, but the spirit, the meaning of the past, the ways of living. That's what the area does."*

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**Dining is an important component of downtown redevelopment. The Globe restaurant attracts patrons downtown during evening hours.**

"He'd be teaching private classes, operating a kiln," Michaelsen said, "We'll be glad to re-establish the ceramic tradition here. She noted that Rigsby will join with musical instrument maker Anden Houben, painter Ann Betak, blacksmith Steve Davis, jewelry maker Celia O'Kelley and book artists Michael Fallon and Paula Gorley to fill all of the available spaces.

### **Putting Northport on the Map**

Northport has been selected as one of "Top 20 Small Art Towns in America," and listed in "The 100 Best Small Art Towns in America" book by John Villani. The Kentuck Festival, an annual October event featuring folk and outsider art and traditional crafts, held several blocks west of downtown in Kentuck Park, was selected by the Southeast Tourism Society as one of the Top 20 Events in the South for 1995-96, and one of the Top 200 Best Art Events in the United States in 1996.

Across the river, the Tuscaloosa Convention and Visitors Bureau's new marketing campaign, "Tuscaloosa, A Cultural Gem" proudly touts Kentuck's and downtown Northport's accomplishments in its listing of area attractions.

As the variety and stability of its downtown grows, community activities are on the rise. The Kentuck Association has been a driving force behind these events, including Northport's monthly Art Night, which offers tours of downtown galleries and studios, and the Christmas-time Dickens Downtown Festival. With a pattern of dynamic growth underway, you can expect to see more events showcasing the area's appealing character.



**Northport, one of the best small art towns in America.**



**Studios and shops abound.**

### **Kentuck Festival Fueled Growth**

The projects of the Kentuck Association have strong community roots. Kentuck Festival of the Arts, originally a small event on the sidewalks of downtown's Main Avenue, grew out of the Northport Centennial Celebration in 1971. In fact, the name "Kentuck" was the first name for the Northport community.

The festival quickly grew, moved to Kentuck Park in 1973, and now annually features 300 invited artists from throughout the United States. People come from all over the South to see the work of nationally-acclaimed visionary folk artists and demonstrations by expert traditional craftsmen. Visual arts are augmented with musical performances, storytelling, children's arts activities and unique southern and ethnic specialty foods.

Proceeds from the festival provided seed money for development of the Kentuck Art

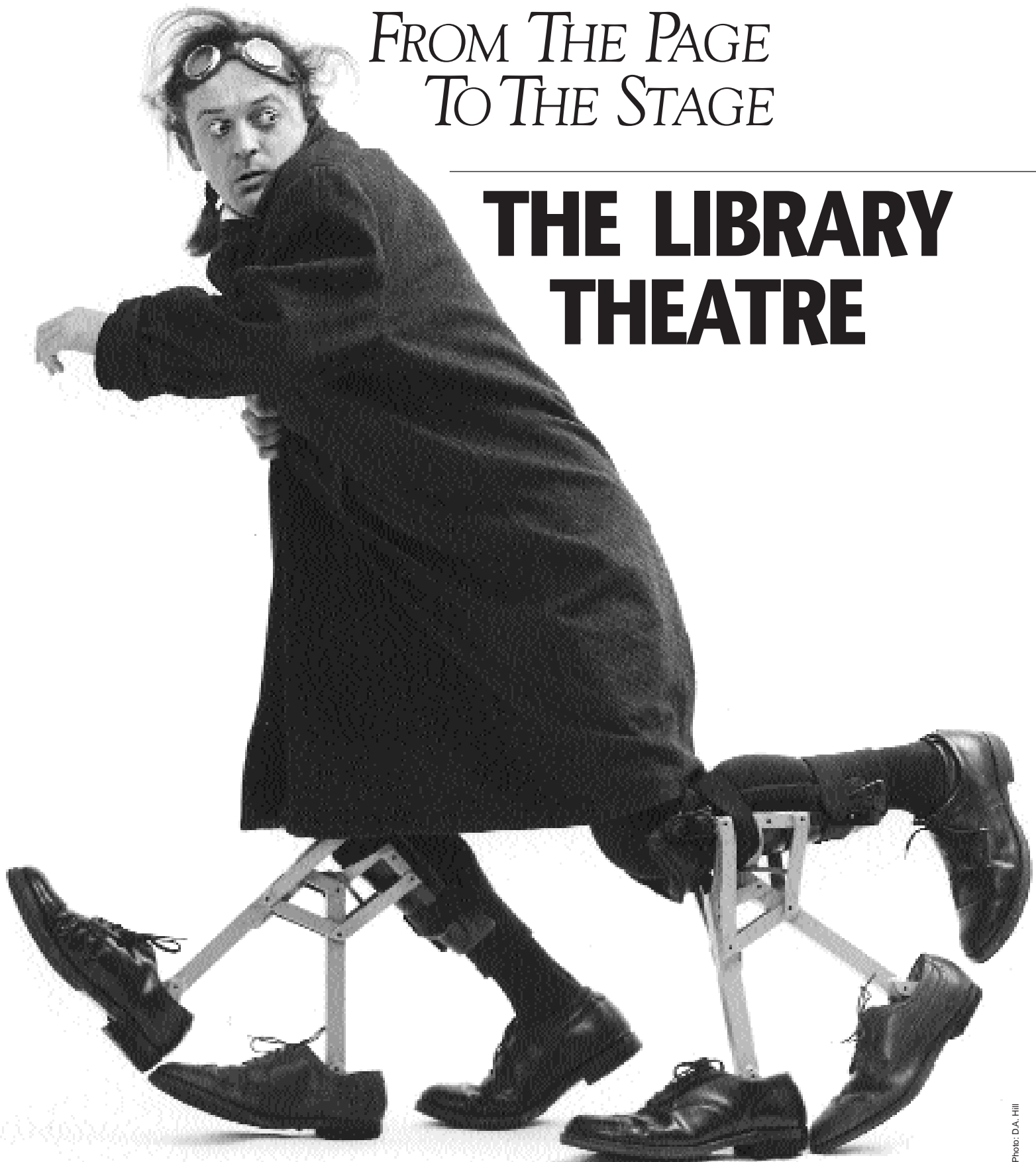
Center, with purchase of property in 1979. A federally-funded CETA training program, partnership with the Northport Chamber of Commerce and grants from the Alabama State Council on the Arts encouraged early growth.

Reviewing Kentuck's history, founding director Georgine Clarke said, "I'm proud of the national status of the Kentuck Festival of the Arts. But in the long view, when you stand there looking at the studios, the artists, the exhibition space, the revitalization of the downtown—that is what I feel proudest of.

"There's still so much potential in that area. I believe they will continue the progress, develop increased support of the arts, focus on the role of the river, and still maintain the character of a small Southern town. Northport is a very viable, exciting place."

FROM THE PAGE  
TO THE STAGE

# THE LIBRARY THEATRE



Tomás Kubínek, "Certified Lunatic and Master of the Impossible"

Photo: DA Hill



by  
**MARCIA  
LEWIS HESS**

Marcia Lewis Hess is a free-lance writer who has worked and consulted with Hoover Public Library for the past five years. She is the owner of Howling At The Moon Writing Service.

**S**hakespeare upstairs. Shakespeare downstairs. Throw in some Bach, a little Broadway and a dash of swashbuckle. Welcome to The Library Theatre, a posh 250-seat facility located on the lower level of Hoover Public Library, outside of Birmingham.

Since opening night five years ago, The Library Theatre has hosted productions of all genres from across the country. For those who expect a library function to be stuffy . . . guess again. This theatre rocks.

Past seasons have brought a country blues opera version of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, as well as *Twelfth Night*, presented by the highly acclaimed North Carolina Shakespeare Festival. Modern dance, light opera, comedy and Broadway musicals also have been featured, with the annual Gerhart Chamber Musical Festival topping off each season.

### **Culture and Community— Suburban Style**

The force behind The Library Theatre, the woman who saw possibility and made it reality, is Library Director Linda Andrews.

"Here we were in one of the fastest-growing cities in Alabama. Hoover had the state's largest retail complex, an impressive recreational center and entertainment options galore. Yet every single cultural activity focused around downtown Birmingham, which was 17 miles away," Andrews said. "There was a real need for a cultural center out here in the suburbs, a need the library could fill."

In 1983, when Hoover Public Library was a mere 2,000-square foot operation in a strip shopping center, Andrews invited the Alabama Symphony to play in the parking lot. To protect the violins from harmful rays, the public works department constructed a sunscreen. "The evening was an enormous success. Fifteen hundred people were in our parking lot, sitting in the hot sun, but the violins were safe," said Andrews.

Through the years, as the library changed locations, Andrews brought productions to city

council chambers, patios—whatever area was available. "I knew the interest was there. I just kept thinking, 'If only we had a stage,'" she said.

When plans were drawn for the library's present 45,000-square foot building, the lay of the land proved to be a major boon to Andrews' dream. There was a natural bowl in the hillside, perfect for an auditorium.

"We knew we needed an auditorium, but the vision of a real theater kept coming back to me," Andrews said. "I did some research and decided, 'If we're that close, let's go for it.'"

With support from the City of Hoover and help from a veteran theater professional, the late Mary Jean Parson, the necessary adaptations were made and equipment was purchased. Andrews finally had her theater.

"Looking back, I didn't have any idea what I was getting into," Andrews commented. "I guess sheer ignorance served me well."

### **Making It Work**

As acceptance and attendance grew, Andrews hired Kristl Self as the library's full-time arts program coordinator. "We needed someone to take the theatre to the next level," Andrews said. With a degree in theater and community theater experience, Self was a natural for the position.

In her first year, Self doubled the number of productions. She sought performers from across the country, resulting in an amazing variety of offerings.

Does she see herself in competition with other Birmingham theaters? "No," Self said. "Each Birmingham theater has a distinct personality and fills a particular niche. That's not what we're about. We take more of a 'smorgasbord' approach, providing a sampler of music,



HOOVER PUBLIC LIBRARY  
RECENTLY WAS NAMED ONE  
OF THREE RUNNERS-UP  
NATIONWIDE FOR  
*THE LIBRARY JOURNAL*'S  
PRESTIGIOUS "LIBRARY OF  
THE YEAR" AWARD.

drama, comedy and dance each season."

The formula seems to be working. More than 15,000 people have attended the theatre since its opening.

#### **A Theatre With A Mission**

The goals of The Library Theatre, Self said, are to entertain, to educate and to enrich—to make theater accessible and affordable for everyone. "If we show children now how wonderful theater can be, we are guaranteeing ourselves audiences in the future.

"Because we receive subsidies from the City of Hoover and grants from the Alabama State Council on the Arts, we've been able to keep ticket prices low," she added. "Our children's performances are \$3. That means an entire family can attend without seriously injuring the budget. Adult performances are \$12, half of what many theaters have to charge."

She continued, "We're not in this to make a

profit. That's very liberating. It allows us to take risks. And if there's one thing this theatre—and this library—are about, it's taking risks."

Andrews added, "I would love to see in 20 years how this has impacted the community. Hopefully, the payoff will come then. If we have a new generation of adults who love and support the arts, we definitely will have succeeded."

#### **Community Outreach**

The Library Theatre is only one example of Hoover Public Library's commitment to the community, Andrews said. "We see the library as a community gathering place. Our job is to serve the whole person."

One of the most successful programs the library hosts is Southern Voices, an annual three-day writer's conference. Recipients of the Southern Voices Award for Distinguished Achievement have included Rosalynn Carter,



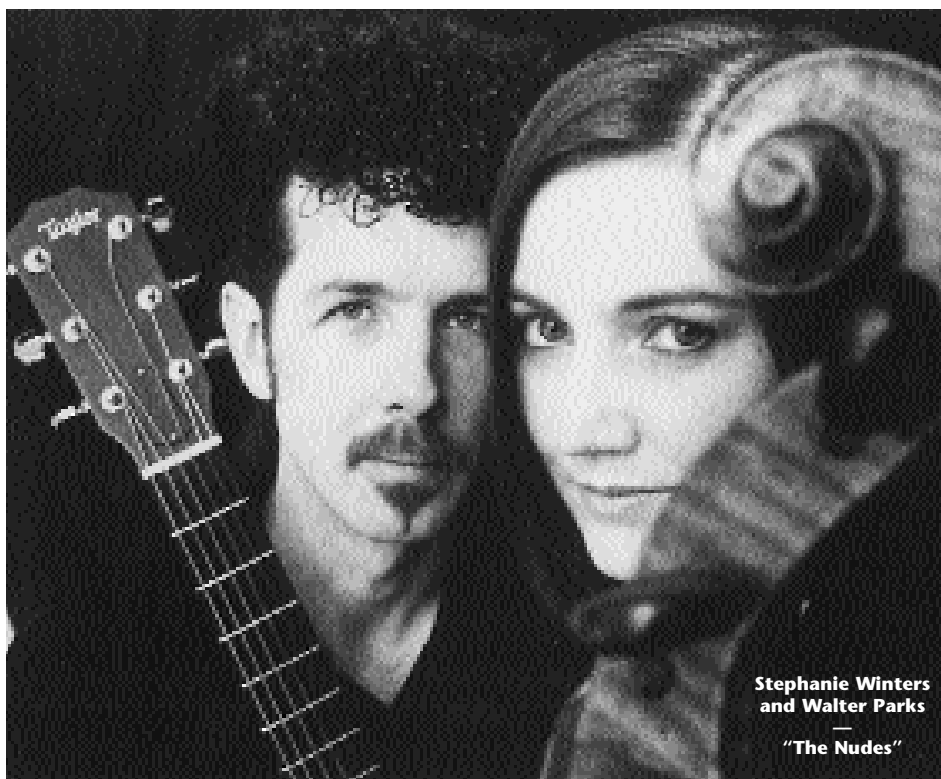
**American Family Theater's  
Robin Hood.**

Pat Conroy and Anne Rivers Siddons. Now in its sixth year, Southern Voices attracts more than 1,000 attendees a year.

Children are another major focus of the program. In addition to the Children's Theatre Season, the annual "Meet the Author" program has been an enormous success, bringing in hundreds of area children each year.

During the theatre's summer hiatus, the library hosts Coffee House Nights, a forum for local poets, songwriters and musicians to present original work. Special evening excursions to Birmingham's Summerfest theater productions and Hoover Nights at the Birmingham Museum of Art are popular. Buses transport patrons to and from downtown Birmingham and tickets are sold at a substantially reduced rate. Beginning this fall, excursions to the Alabama Ballet will be offered.

As for the visual arts, the library houses two art galleries which feature new exhibits each month. Plans are underway for a third gallery, part of an upcoming expansion.



**Stephanie Winters  
and Walter Parks**  
—  
"The Nudes"

Photo: Merri Cyr

## Most Exciting Season Yet

The theatre's current season may be its most exciting—and eclectic—to date. With nine adult performances and three children's performances scheduled, it also promises to be one of the busiest.

The Adult Series begins with the comedy hit, *The Compleat Works of Wllm Shakspr (abridged)*, followed by the biting satire of *Animal Farm*. Broadway hits *I Do, I Do* and *Once in a Lifetime* are also scheduled, as well as a performance by Southern Danceworks, the state's oldest modern dance company.

Musical offerings include Little Jack Melodie and the Young Turks, a neo-cabaret group with tuba, saxophone and foot-powered organ. Described by *Rolling Stone* as "deeply weird, utterly fab," the group serves up a frenetic mix of polkas, rhumbas, Sinatra tributes and Broadway standards.

In March, the theatre will host the premiere of *Alabama Troubadours*, an original production commissioned by Andrews. Singer/songwriter Karen Pell celebrates off-the-beaten-track Alabama with stories, photos and original songs, traveling from the Ave Maria Grotto to the Coon Dog cemetery and places in-between. The season will conclude with the sixth annual Gerhart Chamber Music Festival, now a summer tradition.

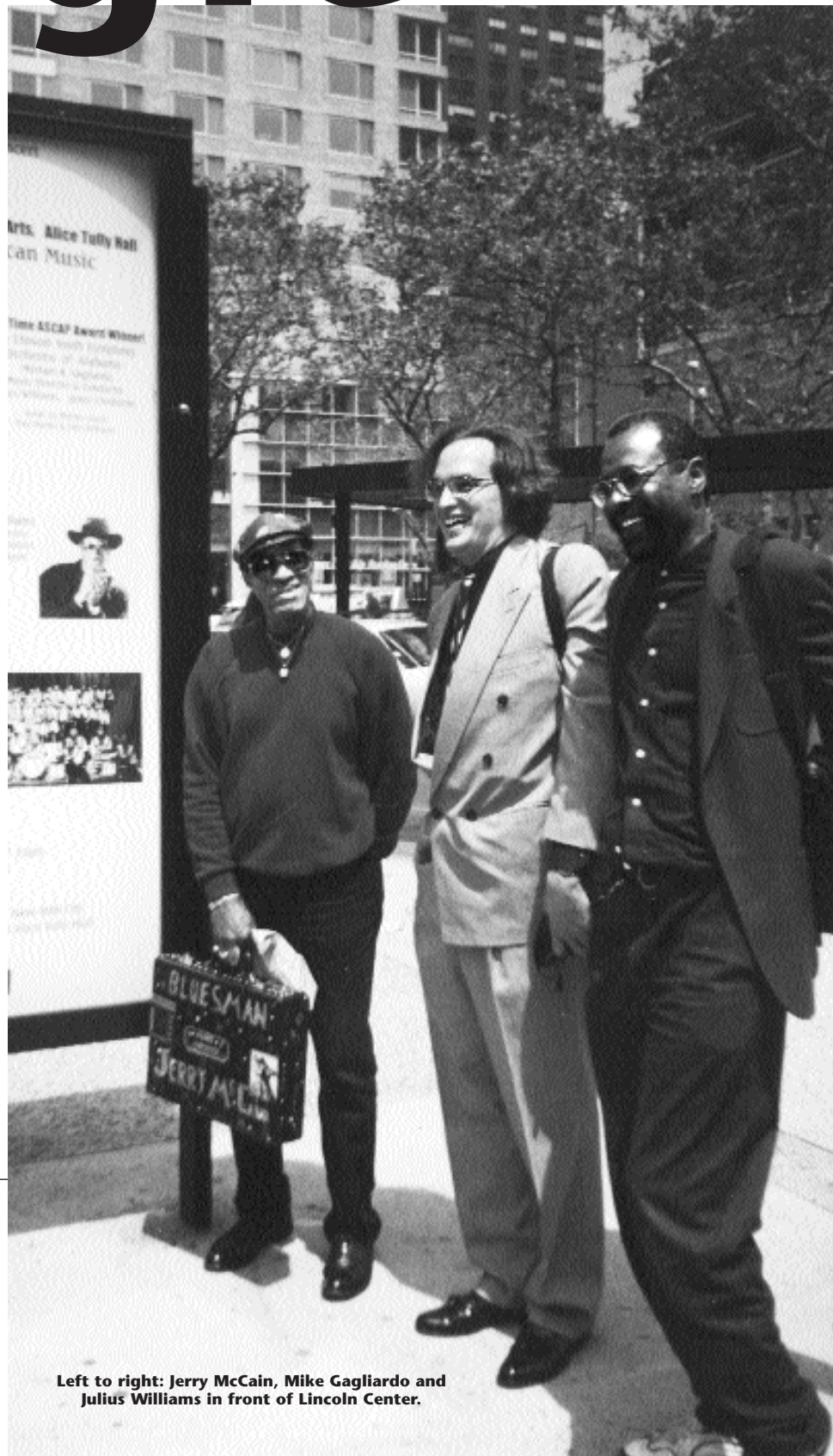
One of the most unusual acts scheduled for the children's season is Tomas Kubinek, "Certified Lunatic and Master of the Impossible." His "evening of surprises" includes flying across the stage as he somersaults backwards with a wine glass on his head.



# Boogie AND THE BAND

GREAT THINGS  
HAPPEN WHEN  
PEOPLE OPEN  
THEIR MINDS  
AND HEARTS  
TO EACH OTHER  
AND THE PLACE  
THAT UNITES  
THEM.

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Left to right: Jerry McCain, Mike Gagliardo and Julius Williams in front of Lincoln Center.

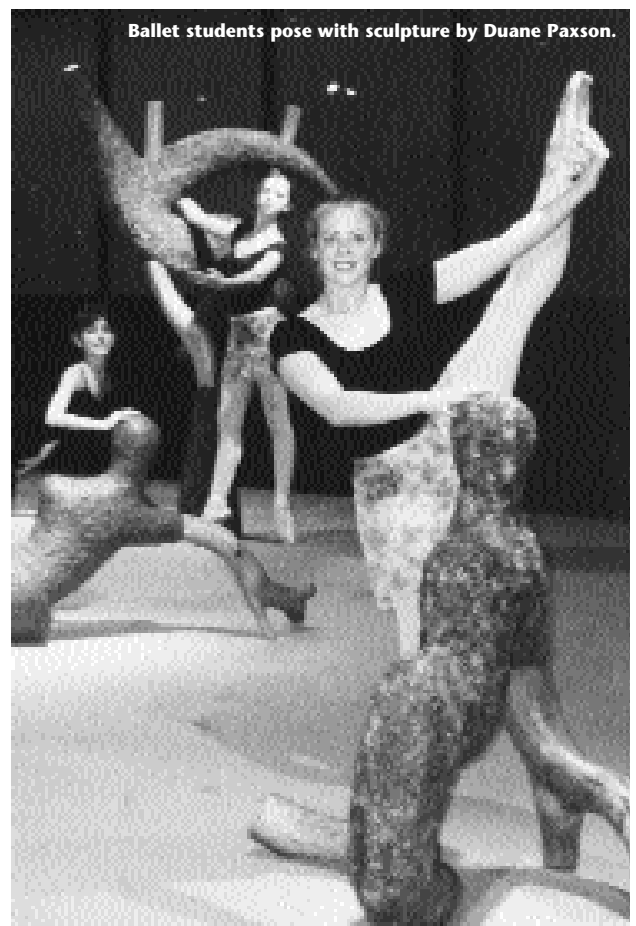


**Y**ears of fundraising have paid off for Gadsden arts enthusiasts. Sitting in the leafy courtyard between the Gadsden Center for Cultural Arts, the children's museum and the adjacent Gadsden Museum of Art, a Center staff member recounts a comment overheard during an evening of jazz under the stars. Two Illinois transplants confessed: "We were afraid to move to Gadsden.

We wanted our children to be exposed to the arts as we were, and ten years ago—there was nothing here." The story brings smiles of recognition, and triumph. Gadsden has put itself on the map for excellence in the arts.

by  
**LISHA BROWN**

Lisha Brown is director of public relations and volunteer resources at the Center for Cultural Arts. She also serves on the Gadsden Metropolitan Arts Council and the Downtown Gadsden Promotion Committee. She is a graduate of Jacksonville State University.



**Ballet students pose with sculpture by Duane Paxson.**

The Center for Cultural Arts was created in response to a survey that named Gadsden as one of the “worst” places to live in the United States. The natives were understandably upset. Their city is on the banks of the Coosa River, surrounded by Appalachian foothills. Natural beauty was its strength—appreciation of the arts was not.

But when civic leaders made a persuasive case for the arts—that business and tourism would benefit, and that children would gain academically and socially—the town got busy raising money. The Center for Cultural Arts was opened and other cultural facilities expanded in all directions. Now there’s even a symphony orchestra.

The Center is a multiplex of performing and visual arts. It is the site of a 72-foot model railroad made by the Coosa Valley Railroad Club, a restaurant, meeting and performance space and a splendid children’s museum, Imagination Place, which offers hands-on, fun activities designed to encourage science and art education.

The Center’s courtyard is more than a gathering place; it was built—literally brick by brick—with \$40 contributions from members of the Gadsden community. Each brick bears the name of a contributor or someone a contributor loves.

## **Music is Music**

On any day at the Center for Cultural Arts, the Etowah Youth Orchestras (EYO) may be in rehearsal, or the Honor Strings, or the June Bugg Prelude Strings. The visual arts are taught in this building, and local thespians may be rehearsing their next production. Weddings, proms, conventions and business meetings take place there. In fact, the Center for Cultural Arts was bursting at the seams until a recent expansion program provided additional space.

At the beginning of Gadsden’s cultural revolution, about 1990, State Representative June Moore Bugg and arts activists Basil Gilchrist and Benny Dean wrote the “bingo bill,” which generated the funding for the start-up of the Etowah Youth Orchestras. It was their desire to provide the youth of Etowah County, regardless of their economic status, with the opportunity to participate in a symphony program. This year the seven-year old Etowah Youth Orchestra was awarded First Place in Programming of Contemporary Music by the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers and the American Symphony Orchestra League. Competing with 183 youth orchestras, including organizations from New York, Oakland and Chicago, the talented young musicians from Gadsden won the blue ribbon.

Even more exciting were the orchestra’s activities in celebration of Gadsden’s 150th birthday in 1996. EYO Conductor/Director Mike Gagliardo was eager to participate. “The Orchestra wanted to be a part of the Gadsden Sesquicentennial activities, and we felt that a good way to do this would be to commission a new work that would be in honor of the city and its most acclaimed musician. After talking to several people, we determined that person to be Jerry “Boogie” McCain. So we decided to create a work in honor of the anniversary and in recognition of Jerry’s lifetime of musical accomplishments.

The City of Gadsden and the Etowah Youth Orchestra Parents Organization sponsored the commission, each group contributing \$1,000. Gagliardo’s work had just begun. “I contacted a friend of mine who owns a music publishing business in St. Louis and asked her which of her composers could write for harmonica and orchestra,” he said. “Harmonica is not a common instrument in orchestral repertoire and there are few composers who have written for

harmonica. She recommended Julius Williams of New York.”

Following the call from Gagliardo, Williams went back to his colleagues at the Berklee School and told them a crazy conductor in Alabama wanted him to compose a piece for harmonica and orchestra. He laughed, but agreed to do it. The more he thought about it the more he liked the idea.

A classically trained musician—young, affluent and African American—Williams crossed a cultural divide to meet, in McCain, the unglorified voice of the blues. McCain says the blues is dying in the black community: “You can’t go out in the streets and find ten Black kids who want to listen to the blues. If we don’t teach our kids, it will be a lost art.”

Gagliardo sent Boogie McCain’s recordings to Williams to give him some idea of how the piece should be constructed. Williams was impressed with McCain’s work and excited about the project. Next hurdle: how to create music for someone who doesn’t read music. According to Gagliardo, “Julius came up with a solution of giving the harmonica soloist large sections in the work to solo over standard blues chords. The piece will never be performed the same way twice. The element of improvisation that is crucial in blues and jazz music is present in this symphonic work.”

“It was...nerve wracking at first,” Gagliardo said of the first rehearsal with Julius Williams and Jerry McCain. “We didn’t know how everything was going to fit together. When you deal with somebody who is used to soloing with a symphony orchestra you know what to expect.”

McCain didn’t know what to expect either. “I had never played with an orches-

tra. Honeychild, this was the first. It's entirely different from playing with blues bands. But they were in the groove so people knew I could take it further if I wanted to."

Everyone present experienced that rare awareness that they were living a very special moment in time, a moment they would never forget. "Boogie" McCain, dressed in black from his hat to his boots, extended his hand to the young composer Julius Williams, also dressed in black. The two stellar musicians took to each other immediately. Williams raised his baton and the Etowah Youth Orchestra, having rehearsed without the soloist, played "Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra" for the first time with harmonica. And what a harmonica! Neither players nor conductor had ever seen him perform. From the haunting wail of McCain's first note the room was electric.

The orchestra provided the melody that flowed like the mighty Coosa River, Jerry "Boogie" McCain showed them all what the blues is about.

Dancing around the conductor's stand, he put body and soul into every note. It was all the orchestra and Williams could do to keep playing. They wanted to sit back and drink in the blues played by "the master." The Etowah Youth Orchestra, Julius Williams, Mike

Gagliardo and Jerry McCain performed the piece again at Wallace Hall on the campus of Gadsden State Community College. Next, they were invited to perform at Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City. There, the performers of "Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra" demonstrated to a national audience that music is an expression of culture and different cultures can indeed combine in strange and glorious ways.



**Etowah Youth Symphony Orchestra in performance at the Gadsden Amphitheater.**

# *New Year's Eve* **PARTY**



**First nighters parade through the streets of downtown Mobile.**

by  
**COURIE  
FERGUSON**

Courie Ferguson lives in Mobile and works as a copy writer. She attended the Alabama School of Fine Arts and graduates this fall from the University of South Alabama with an English major and art minor.



**M**obile has found a sure-fire way to get everybody involved in celebrating the arts. Here's the formula that has worked for seven years: throw a big party with local and national performers in a wide variety of artistic and cultural events. Invite everybody. Charge a mere \$5 for admission. And most importantly, stage the celebration on a night when everyone wants to go out and have fun.

First Night Mobile is the city's alcohol-free, family oriented New Year's Eve celebration of the arts. Since 1990, it has expanded from a moderate-sized street party to a major event which attracts more than 35,000 people to downtown Mobile.

The celebration begins at 5 p.m. on December 31. Everyone is welcomed and accommodated regardless of age, gender, race, physical limitations, socio-economic background or cultural refinement. Venues are handicapped accessible and sign language interpreters are provided when feasible. More than 200 performers in over 30 locations contribute to the party atmosphere.

Festival planners include a wide variety of entertainment not only to attract more people but also to allow people to sample new things. Renee Eley Ellis, director of the city's Office of Special Events explained that the art-based program is extremely popular because it covers a broad spectrum. "We go from simple entertainment to culturally refined performances," she said.

On their way to hear a popular cajun band, patrons pass classical guitarists, dancers, magicians and large sculpture installations. "Of course we include acts that draw the crowds, but we're careful not to make this just another music festival. Mobile already offers great concerts and music festivals," added Ellis. "First Night is a cultural event but we certainly don't exclude any aspects of culture." Often patrons will find themselves relishing sounds and sights they never thought they would enjoy.

Hiring over 200 performers for one evening is no small job. Local artists are given first consideration. Next, planners look for quality and appropriateness of the performance for a family event. Finally, they consider logistics, availability of a suitable location and price.

Music is certainly a big attraction, though not the total focus of the festival. Acts range

from gospel, zydeco, children's singers, folk, jazz, blues, rock, Latin, classical and chamber music to international styles seldom heard on these shores. There are also theatrical presentations, comedy acts, magic, juggling and acts geared specifically to youngsters.

Most performances last less than 45 minutes and performers put on several shows so that patrons can discover new acts without worrying about missing their favorites.

The visual arts are another important aspect of First Night Mobile. Art placed in and around performance areas adds to the magic of the evening. Large sculpture installations stretch over the streets and smaller sculptures are placed in pocket gardens. First Nighters enjoy films, photography, painting, pottery and anything else planners can include. Revelers can create their own art, making hats or masks, decorating umbrellas, painting or creating a life-sized silhouette of themselves to add to a giant mural.

"It is important for us to cover all the bases," said Jo Ann Cox, visual arts chairman. "Everyone likes something. Our job is to make sure they can see it or experience it here. We are careful to include hands-on projects and displays which appeal to all ages and artistic levels."

### **Making It Happen**

The biggest champions of First Night Mobile are the more than 400 volunteers ranging in age from 10 to 90. They make the festival run smoothly, spending countless hours year-round planning and long hours during the festival handling the details. "The volunteers make First Night Mobile," asserted Ellis. "They give their time freely because they feel this is an important event."

Funding comes from both corporate and private donations; venues are made available without charge by downtown property owners.

Even the smallest monetary or in-kind donations are recognized in First Night Mobile publications.

When the festival started seven years ago, there was plenty of performance space available. Downtown had a few specialty shops and bars, but it was mainly a daylight business district. Now it is difficult for planners to find new space because downtown is "hot property" with a booming entertainment, restaurant, shopping and residential areas.

Most of the festival area is closed to cars so that festival goers can move about freely without worrying about traffic. Police officers on foot, horseback and bicycle blend into the scene with ease.

Business owners love First Night. Deborah Gibson of A&M Peanut Shop said First Night is an excellent night for profits, second only to Mardi Gras. "The crowd is more family oriented and not so rowdy. There's a lot of drinking at Mardi Gras," she said.

The absence of alcohol has helped First Night Mobile maintain an impeccable safety record. The crowd is largely families and the easygoing atmosphere makes them feel secure. "I don't drink, and I have two small boys," said Derrick Dixon, who attended his first First Night last year. "This is a way I can spend New Year's Eve with them and not worry about them getting bored, and I don't have to be around drinkers. There's something for all of us. It's great."

First Night is an international celebration held in over 123 cities in the United States and 16 in Canada. The experiences of other cities helped First Night Mobile planners find their successful formula. "Of course our celebration is tailored to Mobile," Ellis said. "Otherwise it just wouldn't work. What makes First Night Mobile magic is the atmosphere. Anyone can go to a New Year's Eve party, but our party is an evening filled with unusual entertainment in unique places."



**Age is no barrier in art activities.**



**Musical feat.**

by  
**DAWN SMITH**

Dawn Smith is serving the second year of a two-year term as president of the Opelika Arts Association.

# *Partners in the* **Arts**

## **Editor's Note:**

The Opelika Arts Association (OAA) is well organized, with an active membership and strong support from local government, school officials, businesses and major national funding institutions. All these factors combine to produce highly successful programs.

The 32-year-old arts support group reaches into every aspect of community life, said president Dawn Smith. Its mandate is to "serve all the people of Lee County by fostering the arts . . . to promote, to implement, to coordinate, to advise, and to encourage all phases of the arts," she said, quoting from the OAA history.

Arts Council member Roslyn Stern was the first president of the Pallet and Brush Arts Association, a group of "Sunday painters" who wanted the arts in their community. "There was nothing, period, no arts activity," she said of the time. The founders' initial enthusiasm produced several successful art shows and master classes. Then a broader emphasis began to emerge.

"One of our strengths has always been bringing high quality arts programming into the community," Stern said. "Our concert series sells out." Arts education is another community focus, she added. Even before the Pallet and Brush organized, there was a community fund drive to send two children to a summer arts camp. The OAA is not only concerned with arts education and enrichment, it sponsors a group of young volunteers in hopes of continuing community support and developing future audiences.



Amy Burdette (left) and her aunt, Amy Scott, sell cokes at the annual Arts Festival.



**Left: Scenes from Puccini's *La Boheme*, performed by New York City Opera Company at the Opelika Center for the Performing Arts.**

**Below: Lenore Blank Kelner's "Bringing Literature to Life" workshop, a Partners in Education program.**



*"Because of the arts programming, the arts education, and the arts partnerships that have been established, the Opelika Arts Association continues to be an important cultural asset to our community and one of our most progressive assets. It has also been an economic impetus for the City of Opelika and a catalyst for many related events and activities. We are grateful for all that this organization contributes."*

— Mayor Barbara Patton

Thirty-two years ago volunteers met to establish the Opelika Arts Association. It was soon incorporated and its scope enlarged to include Lee County. This in itself was the culmination of a drive to raise scholarship funds to send youngsters to summer arts camp. As the membership grew, so did the need for formal organization and leadership. Committees were appointed and events were scheduled to bring prominent performers in art, theater, dance, and music to Opelika.

New needs continue to arise and the Association has grown and sought new ways to meet them. Currently, there are several programs operating under the umbrella of the Association which involve the community, city government, and local schools.

### **Visual Arts**

The OAA's visual arts program exhibits works of professional and amateur artists as well as student art shows. Space for the gallery is furnished by the City of Opelika, while the OAA coordinates and schedules upcoming events.

The Gallery is located in the Lewis Cooper, Jr., Memorial Library and Arts Center at 200 South Sixth Street and is open daily. The OAA has a permanent art collection of more than 75 pieces. The Association continually adds to the collection with purchases from works exhibited at the Arts Festival.

### **Performing Arts**

The OAA and the city school system jointly present outstanding talent in the performing arts. Since its premiere season in 1987, the OAA Performance Series has offered music from classical to country and pop; dramatic theater, Broadway musicals, dance, opera and more. Performances by artists of national and international stature draw sellout audiences. The series is at home in the Opelika Center for Performing Arts, a 1200-seat theater. Generous corporate support from throughout the city and state and a subscriber base drawn from a multi-county area have ensured the Performance Series a continuing place in the cultural life of the community.

### **Arts in Education**

The OAA, in cooperation with the Opelika City Schools, has sponsored several artist-in-education residencies through the years. In this program an artist approved by the Alabama State Council on the Arts comes to the area for a specified time ranging from one week to two years. This program provides



**The Arts Festival  
is great fun for  
children.**



students with in-depth exposure to various art forms as well as the opportunity to observe artists in action.

Another arts in education program is Adventure in the Arts, which is a performance series for students (K-12 grades). It provides challenging and enriching experiences which foster a greater understanding of the human spirit. The series has become a vital complement in the educational process. Last year about 13,000 students attended these performances.

Each year the Association also awards two college scholarships for study in the arts. Last year they were increased from \$750 to \$1000. Other scholarships are awarded for summer studies in the arts.

During the 1996-97 school year, the OAA and Opelika City School System was selected to participate in the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts' Partners in Education Program. Opelika was one of 14 partnerships selected from over 200 applicants from throughout the nation.

At least 130 area teachers attended five workshops by presenters from Maryland, Virginia, and Auburn. Artist residencies in local schools focused on using creative drama and storytelling in the classroom to enhance lessons in literature and history, as well as providing professional assistance to drama teachers in teaching acting fundamentals.

Teachers deepened their understanding of the arts through extra activities such as a backstage tour of the technical production for a national touring opera company. With an exciting new commitment and excellent resources, the arts were brought to life in many regular classrooms, and a new standard was established for teachers' professional development.

### **Showcasing Creativity**

The annual Arts Festival held in Opelika each third Saturday in April has developed into a major showcase for artists and craftsmen from

throughout the Southeast. Nearly 100 artists participate, displaying watercolors, acrylics, woodcraft, hand-crafted jewelry, and many other items. A youth exhibit features the work of more than 500 area students. The Festival features entertainment throughout the day as well as a bake sale. A children's festival is also provided for ages three to eight. Proceeds from the Festival benefit OAA projects. This past year the Festival expanded to a two-day event.

### **Junior Arts**

The Junior Arts Association encourages and promotes the arts among students in grades 9-12. Guided by a representative of the OAA, the young people participate in service projects and cultural activities. By exposing them to the arts during their formative years, we hope they will become adult supporters of the arts.

### **Depot Restoration**

The OAA and the City of Opelika are working together to restore the historic depot which will serve as headquarters for community activities sponsored by the Association. The depot was donated to the city by Norfolk Southern Railroad. The city had previously secured Federal ISTEA (Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991) funds for renovation.

The OAA agreed to raise \$96,400, a 20 percent match for the ISTEA grant of \$385,600. Bricks to be used in the landscaping are being sold for \$40 and prints of the depot are for sale for \$35. Blueprints for the renovation have been approved and bids were opened in July. Completion of the Depot Restoration Project is still a year or so away.



**Left: Community fund  
raising efforts continue.  
Right: Depot restoration  
is underway.**

# Let's Put On A

ALL ACROSS ALABAMA, VOLUNTEERS GATHER TO REHEARSE LINES, LEARN MUSIC, BUILD SETS, SEW COSTUMES, SELL TICKETS AND PERFORM THE COUNTLESS OTHER TASKS IT TAKES TO PUT ON A THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE. "COMMUNITY THEATRE IS THRIVING IN ALABAMA. IT'S AMAZING, THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF PRODUCTIONS BY VOLUNTEER COMPANIES," SAID BECKY MULLEN, PERFORMING ARTS PROGRAM MANAGER FOR THE ALABAMA STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS. MULLEN SAYS THEATRE, ESPECIALLY COMMUNITY THEATRE, IS THE ULTIMATE COLLABORATIVE EXERCISE.

IN THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE, CORRESPONDENTS FROM COMMUNITY THEATRE IN TUSCALOOSA, HUNTSVILLE AND MOBILE SHARE SOME OF THEIR CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES.

ON AT LEAST ONE POINT THEY ALL AGREE: COMMUNITY THEATRE IS WORK, HARD WORK; AND IT'S ENORMOUS FUN.

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## contributors

**DOUG PERRY,** Tuscaloosa

**LEA M. ELLISON,** Huntsville

**MICHAEL MCKEE,** Mobile

# SHOW!

## THEATRE TUSCALOOSA

“When I was hired to run Theatre Tuscaloosa (at that time called Tuscaloosa Community Players) the organization was in serious jeopardy. Attendance was down, the board and membership structure was outdated, and production values were almost nonexistent,” recalled Paul Looney, executive producer. “It’s been a long road, but our place in the community is much more secure.” Underlying the strength of today’s Theatre Tuscaloosa are close ties to the community, especially its partnership with Shelton State Community College.

In 1980 when Looney became artistic director of the group, he also accepted appointment as chairman of the newly-created theatre department at Shelton State Community College. Because Shelton State had no performance facilities, students were invited to participate in Theatre Tuscaloosa productions. They could even obtain college credit for working in the scene shop alongside community volunteers and the professional staff. In 1997 Shelton State was designated “The State Junior College of the Fine Arts” by joint resolution of the Alabama legislature, in part because of its model program with Theatre Tuscaloosa.

Theatre Tuscaloosa has used the historic Bama Theatre in downtown Tuscaloosa as its performing home since 1976. In 1985, it renovated (with the assistance of a UDAG grant from the City of Tuscaloosa) a vacant store for offices, shops and rehearsal halls. When the organization outgrew this space an adjacent store was rented to provide more room for costume storage, offices and rehearsals.

As Shelton State began planning its new campus, Theatre Tuscaloosa was invited to move its base of operations to the new facility. “This new era in the relationship of our organizations is a dream come true for Theatre Tuscaloosa,” said Looney. “The new facilities will not only give us far more room, but our shops, rehearsal halls, offices and performance space will be under the same roof for the first time.” The new Fine Arts Centre, built with the assistance of Theatre Tuscaloosa through a capital campaign, houses five complete dressing rooms, scene shop, costume shop and storage, rehearsal halls and dance studios along with a 495-seat state-of-the-art theatre (to be completed in 1998).

The theatre is designed so that no seat is further than 45 feet from the stage. The orchestra pit will hold 25 musicians and there is a 45-line counter-weight fly system. Adjoining the stage is the 30-foot by 80-foot scene shop, almost twice the size of Theatre Tuscaloosa’s current facility. There is also a loading dock which can accommodate large trucks. The costume construction and storage facility totals almost 1700 square feet, and is in the dressing room

*Chicago.*



Theatre Tuscaloosa



*Tartuffe.*

Theatre Tuscaloosa

area. Other technical areas include permanent booths for stage managers and followspot operators, a large green room for casts, two front-of-house lighting trusses, and a "VIP Room" that allows visitors to observe rehearsals or performances without entering the theatre.

Tom Umphrey, president of Shelton State Community College, said, "Our relationship with Theatre Tuscaloosa over the past 17 years has been remarkably beneficial for both organizations. In fact, it has served as a model for other colleges in the state and Southeast. Our students have benefitted greatly through their contact with Paul and Theatre Tuscaloosa. Now that they will be 'on campus' I expect we'll see even more cross fertilization—the staff at Theatre Tuscaloosa and the professional designers, choreographers and directors will be of immeasurable influence on our students. I can only think of one other two-year school in the entire country that can boast of having a professional theatre like Theatre Tuscaloosa's Stage Centre Company 'in residence' on their campus."

During the 1996-97 season, Theatre Tuscaloosa performed for over 37,000 people from West Alabama and the state. It is the largest arts organization in the area in terms of budget and audience size, and serves as a significant resource for the community. Whether lending its costume collection, building scenery for other organizations or providing administrative advice to ticket services, Theatre Tuscaloosa shares its expertise with dozens of other arts groups and high school drama departments.

### **Many Audiences, Many Shows**

"What I like best about the program we've developed at Theatre Tuscaloosa is its diversity," said Looney. There is a lot to like. The organization's programs include four two-week runs of musicals and straight plays each year, summer workshops for children and teens, a professional division offering performances on tour and at home, a program offering 'alternative' theatre that might not appeal to broad audiences, in-school educational programs for secondary students and student matinees both at the home theatre and in area schools.

Theatre Tuscaloosa has undertaken some of the most challenging shows in the literature of the theatre. Having presented southern classics from *The Little Foxes* to *The Glass Menagerie*, Theatre Tuscaloosa was the first company in the Southeast to produce the Steppenwolf Theatre version of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Last season the group presented the southeastern premiere of *The Woman in Black* along with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Mame* and *The Secret Garden*.

Two "Second Stage" productions were presented featuring the work of new writers or directors. *Womenfolks* by Alabama's Brad Bailey and an evening of one-acts rounded out the alternative season. Stage Centre Company, the professional division, presented an original hour-long program called *Brush Up Your Shakespeare* in every school in the Tuscaloosa City School System and then took the program on tour from Iuka, Mississippi to Brewton, Alabama. Fall saw the group on tour with a musical, *The Gifts of the Magi*, and in the spring Stage Centre was back on the road presenting *Some Enchanted Evening*, the songs of Rodgers and Hammerstein. All told, Theatre Tuscaloosa and its divisions presented 127 performances during the 1997-98 season.

Theatre Tuscaloosa's education programs include school visits to discuss the plays being presented, study guides to assist teachers in preparing their students for seeing plays, and student matinees. During the summer, intensive workshops are offered for both elementary and secondary students. State Board of Education member Sandra Ray said of Theatre Tuscaloosa's educational programs, "With education funds becoming more and more limited, all of us associated with education depend on the masterful events of organizations like this to provide artistic opportunities."

*Theatre Tuscaloosa's move to new and larger facilities is an opportunity to increase its presence in the community and state and to top its own achievements in production values, performance skill, and community outreach.*

•

*Peter Filichia, president of the Association of New York Drama Critics, wrote about a Theatre Tuscaloosa production: "I've seen regional theatres virtually since their inception, and the work that this group does is not only a great credit to the town and the state but the nation."*



# COMMUNITY THEATRE IN HUNTSVILLE

In Hollywood, actors and other artists work freelance. They do a network soap one season, a sitcom for an independent producer the next, and a film for a major studio in between. This model has been adopted in the theatre community of Huntsville: actors, directors, designers, and tech crews switch easily from children's theatre to musicals to Shakespeare. However, the six companies that produce most mainstream theatre in Huntsville have improved on the Hollywood model by replacing harsh competition with an extraordinary level of cooperation. It's all about choices for audiences and options for artists, with a strong dose of practicality thrown in.

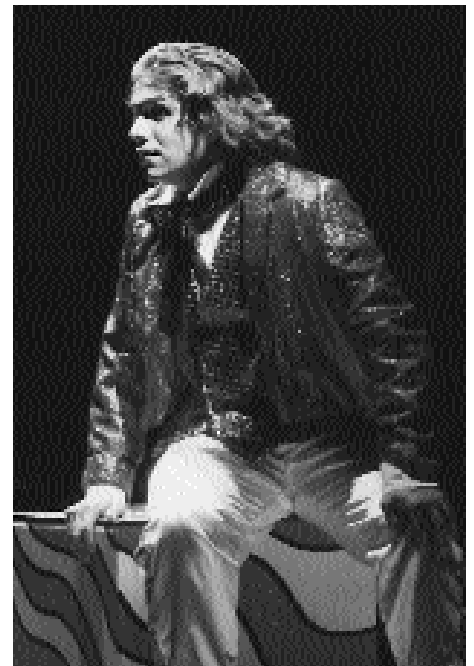
From 5:30 until midnight on a hot night in August 1996, twenty people sat in stiff folding chairs, with not quite enough pizza, engaged in serious debate over what makes good acting, good dance, good design...and what can make good theatre great. These same people had spent hundreds of hours attending shows produced by Huntsville companies in the 1995-96 season. On that night, they were choosing the 1996 WINGS Awards winners. They included judges appointed by each company, but so little favoritism was evident that it was difficult for an observer to match a judge with his or her company's plays.

Founded in 1992, the WINGS Awards is affiliated with none but draws from all to reward accomplishment across genres and organizational boundaries. The gala WINGS Awards Ceremony each October celebrates the quantity and variety of theatre in Huntsville as well as individual achievements.

There is strong precedent for cooperation. In July 1995, a fire marshal's inspection revealed violations in paint storage practices in the Von Braun Center (VBC) scene shop. Faced with imminent closure of the shop, several tenants met to find ways to keep it open. The Arts

Council appointed a staff liaison to assist and advise the committee, and the group quickly named itself "ThUGs" (Theatre Users Group). They shared the cost of a paint locker and created guidelines to safely manage the shared shop. The ThUGs continue to meet monthly to address issues of concern to VBC theatre tenants.

The Von Braun Center Playhouse is usually booked five years in advance. When a few desirable dates opened up recently, directors from all four Playhouse tenants sat down together and worked out dates to suit everybody. Helen Bargetzi, artistic director of Huntsville Opera Theatre (HOT), commented, "It seemed to be a more practical way to do it than each of us making a headlong dash to the VBC office to grab them. WINGS and ThUGs have helped, since now everybody knows each other. We know they laugh at the same things we do and they're not monsters."



**Lane Hosner in Huntsville Community Chorus's *Barnum*, 1995.**

## COMMUNITY THEATRE IN HUNTSVILLE (CONTINUED)



**Top:** Lori Gill and Todd Terry in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Huntsville Little Theatre, 1994.  
**Bottom:** Tom Voight, Jim Zielinski, Phil Thames, Cherie Yancey, Enzie Fleming and Lee Deal in *The Nerd*, Twickenham Repertory Company, 1993.

### Unique Niches

Six companies form the nucleus of Huntsville's theatre community. Their niches are so precisely defined that the diverse missions segue smoothly from one to another over a full range of theatrical forms. Fantasy Playhouse produces community theatre for children, Theatre Huntsville is the community group doing adult plays. Huntsville Community Chorus produces classic musicals, Independent Musical Productions' musicals are more contemporary. Theatre 'Round the Corner is eclectic and market-driven, while Huntsville Opera Theatre produces only opera. What they all share is the talent pool; most actors, directors, designers and technicians value the opportunities to expand their skills by working in many genres. Props, costumes, sets, and music scores are also exchanged among groups.

### Theatre Huntsville

The needs of the shared talent pool spurred the recent merger between Huntsville Little Theatre (HLT) and Twickenham Repertory Company (TRC), two well-established community groups. HLT had been producing since 1950; TRC since 1979. HLT president John Miller explained, "We discovered that audiences didn't differentiate between HLT and TRC, because the actors were the same and the programming had grown similar. In the early years, TRC did avant garde, but they veered to mainstream for financial reasons."

John Hancock, president of TRC, commented in *The Huntsville Times* that "the pool of talent supporting community theater in Huntsville has been stretched dangerously thin." *The Times* explained that the two companies' combined output of nine shows each season was burning out behind-the-scenes volun-

teers and technicians. Miller described Theatre Huntsville's planned six-show season as "reducing the output to improve the quality" of technical production, but noted that no parallel shortage of actors or directors exists.

The merger was the result of a year of strategic planning by both organizations. Each faced increasing external competition for leisure time and dollars, declining audiences, and rising production costs in the VBC Playhouse.

Like HLT and TRC, Theatre Huntsville is truly a community theatre: it pays no staff, contractors, or talent, and shows are selected as much for what company members want to direct or perform as for what audiences want to see.

### Fantasy Playhouse

Fantasy Playhouse is also a volunteer community theatre; this 37-year-old company produces quality theatre for children. Fantasy casts include both children and adults, and only the occasional musician is paid. Known for their strong technical skills, Fantasy personnel freely exchange their expertise with other companies. Miller reflected, "Chorus, Theatre Huntsville and Fantasy have a good rapport because it's a lot of the same people." Fantasy is currently renovating a facility that will make rental spaces available to other companies.

### Huntsville Community Chorus

Community Chorus, now in its fifty-second season, long ago included an annual spring musical in its classical season because the members loved the musical form. A summer musical was later added to involve children and teens whose school schedules prevented them from participating in the spring show.

When Fantasy's new building opens, Chorus will become the major tenant, leasing office and

rehearsal space. Janet Bentley, Chorus president, commented that the two groups, now both volunteer-run, may eventually share office staff. Under another recent agreement, the Chorus publicists will produce Fantasy programs in return for the Fantasy seamstresses doing Chorus' sewing. Bentley added that all the companies exchange program ads, and Chorus and the opera share scores.

### **Huntsville Opera Theatre (HOT)**

HOT was founded sixteen years ago to produce good grand opera using young singers, designers, musicians and theatre artists and to encourage young singers to study opera. According to Bargetzi, HOT is the only volunteer opera company in the U.S. that does grand opera. The company initially attracted small audiences, which have steadily grown. In 1996, there were sell-outs, and in 1998 the company will experiment with longer runs.

"Normally," Bargetzi explained, "young singers have to pay to sing in opera and guarantee to sell so many tickets. I get resumes from outsiders who need the experience and I will use them if they want to do it for free. Our biggest challenge is finding new voices. Leading roles take a year or so to learn. If we get one or two new dedicated people a year, I feel good about it." Bargetzi noted that HOT doesn't have much artistic overlap with the other companies, "they either like opera and want to do it or they don't," but added that she values HOT's WINGS participation and will be leasing storage space from Fantasy.

### **Independent Musical Productions (IMP)**

IMP was founded in 1993 to enhance the existing theatrical community for both actors

and audience by producing musicals "a little to the left of mainstream," according to Lane Hosmer, a Huntsville actor and director. IMP Productions have included *Sweeney Todd*, *Fantasticks*, *Godspell*, *Cabaret*. IMP functions as a community theatre, but its founder-director, actors and technicians are mostly professionals working on a volunteer basis to do these shows. "Actors get a sense of pride from being involved," Hosmer continued. "You can expect a level of dedication and quality that is always far above average."

As a young company, IMP's major challenges are finding a loyal audience and creating a reliable production infrastructure. The company's struggle to maintain artistic excellence while meeting these challenges, and the fact that it performs at Lee High School rather than in the VBC, have served to minimize opportunities for interaction with the other groups. IMP's actors and directors, however, are in demand for other productions.

### **Theatre 'Round the Corner (TRTC)**

TRTC is Huntsville's only year-round, professional theatre and is the only company organized as an entrepreneurial small business rather than a nonprofit corporation. Occupying a converted commercial building, it was founded in 1995 to use theatre to attract tourists to downtown Huntsville. The founders researched the market for 10 years and worked with the U.S. Space & Rocket Center to develop cultural tourism connections. City personnel looking for ways to keep people downtown after working hours enthusiastically supported the enterprise.

TRTC defines itself as market-driven, a place where an audience can consistently come to be entertained, according to Business

Manager Patricia Tatum. Shows run at least three weeks each month.

TRTC is a hybrid organization in that paid professionals and volunteers work side by side. Each show runs at least 14 performances; the longer runs allow actors to fully develop characters and hone the skills they transfer to other productions by other companies, thus improving the quality of all.

TRTC participates in the exchange of talent, costumes, sets, and props among companies, and its sophisticated marketing is helping overcome the public perception that theatre is not mainstream entertainment. Like IMP, TRTC is in a start-up phase.

### **Into the Future**

The opening of the new Fantasy facility will be a milestone. For the first time, companies that have made do in substandard city buildings will have spaces designed for them. "It's too early to tell what impact the acquisition of the new building and the landlord role will have on Fantasy's structure and operations," Carol Morris said, "but it's a good feeling to be in a position to do something that will benefit the other arts groups in the community." That same spirit of cooperation strengthens the Huntsville theatre community, supporting each company's unique artistic vision.

*Some material for this article was provided by The Huntsville Times, "A half-century of local theatre" by Howard Miller, June 8, 1997, and used by permission.*

# MOBILE'S GLOBE-TROTTING THESPIANS



**Mobile Theatre Guild,  
14 North Lafayette Street.**

It's not the largest theater in town, nor is it the oldest, but in the last 47 years the Mobile Theatre Guild (MTG) has made a name for itself in local, state, regional, national and international arts arenas. Despite financial constraints, a severely limited facility, and the decrease in leisure time which affects crucial volunteer hours, MTG has earned artistic acclaim throughout the '90's.

MTG was founded in 1950 by Fr. Anthony Zoghby, who admonished his players to "learn your lines and be good." "In the early years, entertainment and collegiality constituted this organization's *raison d'être*," remarked MTG president Louis Courie in a recent conversation. "Father Zoghby always told us, 'Be big, bold and brassy!'" Later the focus shifted to more refined productions and more serious art which necessitated the hiring of a full-time resident director. Under the various resident directors of the '60's, '70's and early '80's, the theatre primarily staged popular mainstream productions. Large-scale musicals, contemporary comedies and the occasional heavy drama or classic made up the typical season.

Located at 14 North Lafayette Street in Mobile, the MTG facility has a proscenium stage 27 feet wide, 30 feet deep and 8 feet high with a fly system, a small scene shop, scene storage area, costume shop and storage room, two dressing rooms, make-up area, prop loft and green room backstage. A 150-seat house, postage stamp-size lobby and a small reception area make up the rest of the facility.

Current resident director Michael McKee arrived in 1984. With him came an entirely new focus for the theatre. McKee has always insisted, "Don't fight the space. Use it!" That's why the typical fare at MTG today is small cast, ensemble, out of the mainstream plays such as *Lips Together*, *Teeth Apart*; *Ruthless* and *Marvin's Room*. The theatre is known around town as Mobile's Off-Broadway Connection.

## **MTG's Competitive Streak**

In 1991, Bobby Funk, president of the Alabama Theatre League (now Alabama Conference of Theatre and Speech) was trying to generate more interest in the Community Theatre Division in the state. He called McKee and other community theatre directors seeking entries in the state preliminaries for the American Association of Community Theatre Region IV Festival Competition (AACT/Fest). Since *A Walk In The Woods* was in the season and Act One seemed an ideal competition piece, McKee said, "Why not!" The rest, as they say, is history. And what a history it's been.

Why would any theatre take on the added expense of competition? Especially one with limited budget, personnel and a facility in great need of improvement. "Well, for one thing," spouted Courie, "we need to know how good we are. It's sometimes not enough to gauge our work simply by audience response. We need a more objective measurement. Competition and adjudication give us that."

In addition, festivals offer invaluable networking and workshopping opportunities. "We have discovered how other companies solve similar problems," Courie said. Recent theatre festivals have provided ideas for fundraising, obtaining in-kind services, such as printing and flowers for the lobby, and ideas for establishing educational and community outreach programs. "At a time when theatre companies are scrambling to make up the deficit from lost public funding, MTG's higher profile—the direct result of successful competition—has led to critical corporate sponsorship," said Courie. Festivals have also proven to be great venues for new scripts, scripts which may not be well known, but which fit the Guild's criteria. Several have been produced with great success. One seen at this year's national competition is being considered for production in the near future.

"Furthermore, we are proud to serve as cultural ambassadors for our city and state," said Rebecca Britton, current vice-president and former president. "We enjoy promoting Mobile and Alabama as areas of rich cultural opportunity. As we all know, sometimes our state is perceived as a cultural void. Festival audiences are often surprised at the quality of our productions. Norman Small, artistic director of Theatre Winter Haven, (Fla.), a previous national contender, has more than once marveled at the extraordinary pool of talent seen in MTG productions."

The 1997-98 season of five shows opened in late September. In October, there's a Halloween Costume Auction, as well as Bon Temps Mobile, the annual fundraising extravaganza. In February, MTG will host the Mid-winter National Board of Directors Meeting of the American Association of Community Theatres. The Southeastern Theatre Conference in Birmingham follows soon after. Educational Outreach occurs in April with the annual city-



***Smoke on the Mountain* family portrait.**





**Right: *Anything Goes*.**



***Walk in the Woods*.**

wide vaudeville competition. Then, In May, the group must remount the full-length version of *Smoke On the Mountain* for competition at the Dundalk International Maytime Festival in Dundalk, Ireland. MTG is the official U.S. entry.

That doesn't include the community service projects such as performing for the Salvation Army Benefit, participating in the Mobile AIDS Support Service Walk-a-thon, and the American Cancer Society's Relay-For-Life, just to name a few. The 27-member, hands-on board of directors and more than 260 volunteers who contribute approximately 40,000-man hours have a busy year ahead of them. One ad-hoc committee is investigating the feasibility of hosting the National AACT Convention and AACTFest competition in the year 2001. This will bring the top ten community theatre productions in the country to Mobile. "We've taken Mobile to the nation in Kansas City and Grand Rapids. Now we want to bring the nation to Mobile, Alabama," said Britton.

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The dynamism and growth of MTG can be attributed not only to the sustained quality of MTG productions, but also to a deliberate attempt to widen the company's reputation. "That's why festival participation and national and state organizational members are important," Courie asserted. Theatre companies in Alabama have a unique opportunity this year to see what these organizations can do for them by attending the Southeastern Theatre Conference in Birmingham next March and by entering the state competition. If interested, contact Mel Christian, phone 205/348-3848; fax 205/348-9048.

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## MTG IN THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

### REGIONAL

#### **A WALK IN THE WOODS**

SETC Winston Salem, N.C. 1991

Best Production; Best Direction - Michael McKee; Best Actor - Louis Courie

#### **A LIFE IN THE THEATRE**

SETC Orlando, Fla. 1992

Excellence in Acting - Louis Courie;  
Excellence in Acting - Daniel Mainwaring

#### **MARVIN'S ROOM**

SETC Washington, D.C. 1993

Best Set - Lyle Miller; Excellence in  
Acting - Sue Ellen Gerrells

#### **WOMENFOLKS**

SETC Norfolk, Va. 1995

Best Direction - Michael McKee;  
Best Actress - Patricia Marsh

#### **SMOKE ON THE MOUNTAIN**

SETC Miami, Fla. 1997

Best Production; Best Supporting Actor -  
William Watts

### NATIONAL

#### **A WALK IN THE WOODS**

AACTFest '91 Kansas City, Kansas

Placed Fourth; Best Lighting - John Ross;  
Honorable Mention Best Direction -  
Michael McKee

#### **SMOKE ON THE MOUNTAIN**

AACTFest '97 Grand Rapids, Mich.

Placed First; Outstanding Direction -  
Michael McKee; Outstanding Musical  
Direction - Stan Chapman; Outstanding  
Performance - Sally Pearsall; Outstanding  
Performance - William Watts; Outstanding  
Costumes - Michele Feltman;  
Outstanding Hair Design - Sherrick Sandy

### INTERNATIONAL

#### **MARVIN'S ROOM**

Dundalk International Maytime Theatre  
Festival '98 Dundalk, Ireland

## ALABAMA'S COMMUNITY THEATERS

#### ALEXANDER CITY

*Lakeside Players*

#### ANNISTON

*ACTheater*

#### ATMORE

*Atmore Community Theatre*

#### AUBURN

*Small Time Outreach Productions*

#### BIRMINGHAM

*Birmingham Festival Theatre,  
Seasoned Performers, Terrific New  
Theatre*

#### CHICKASAW

*Chickasaw Civic Theatre*

#### CLANTON

*Peachtree Players*

#### DECATUR

*Backstage, Inc., Bank Street Players,  
Dream Weavers, Encore!*

#### DEMOPOLIS

*The Canebroke Players*

#### DOTHAN

*Southeast Alabama Community  
Theatre (SEACT), Understudy  
Dinner Theatre*

#### EUFAULA

*Eufaula Little Theatre*

#### FAIRHOPE

*Theatre 98*

#### FLORENCE

*New Directions Theatre Group,  
Segue Community Theatre,  
The Shoals Community Theatre's  
Zodiac Players and Gingerbread  
Players*

#### FT. PAYNE

*Landmark Players*

#### GADSDEN

*Theatre of Gadsden*

#### GILBERTOWN

*Ballet & Theatre Arts Co.*

#### GULF SHORES

*South Baldwin Community Theater*

#### GUNTERSVILLE

*The Whole Backstage*

#### HAMILTON

*Bevill Community Theatre*

#### HUNTSVILLE

*Theatre Huntsville, Fantasy  
Playhouse, Independent Musical  
Productions*

#### MOBILE

*Joe Jefferson Players, Mobile Theatre  
Guild, Pixie Players*

#### MONTEVALLO

*Montevallo Main Street Players*

#### MONTGOMERY

*A Theatre*

#### RED BAY

*Bay Tree Council for Performing Arts*

#### SELMA

*Encore Community Theatre Inc.*

#### TUSCALOOSA

*Theatre Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa  
Children's Theatre*

#### TUSCUMBIA

*Center Stage Community Theatre*

#### TUSKEGEE

*Tuskegee Repertory Theater*

#### TRUSSVILLE

*Trussville Area Arts Council*

#### VALLEY

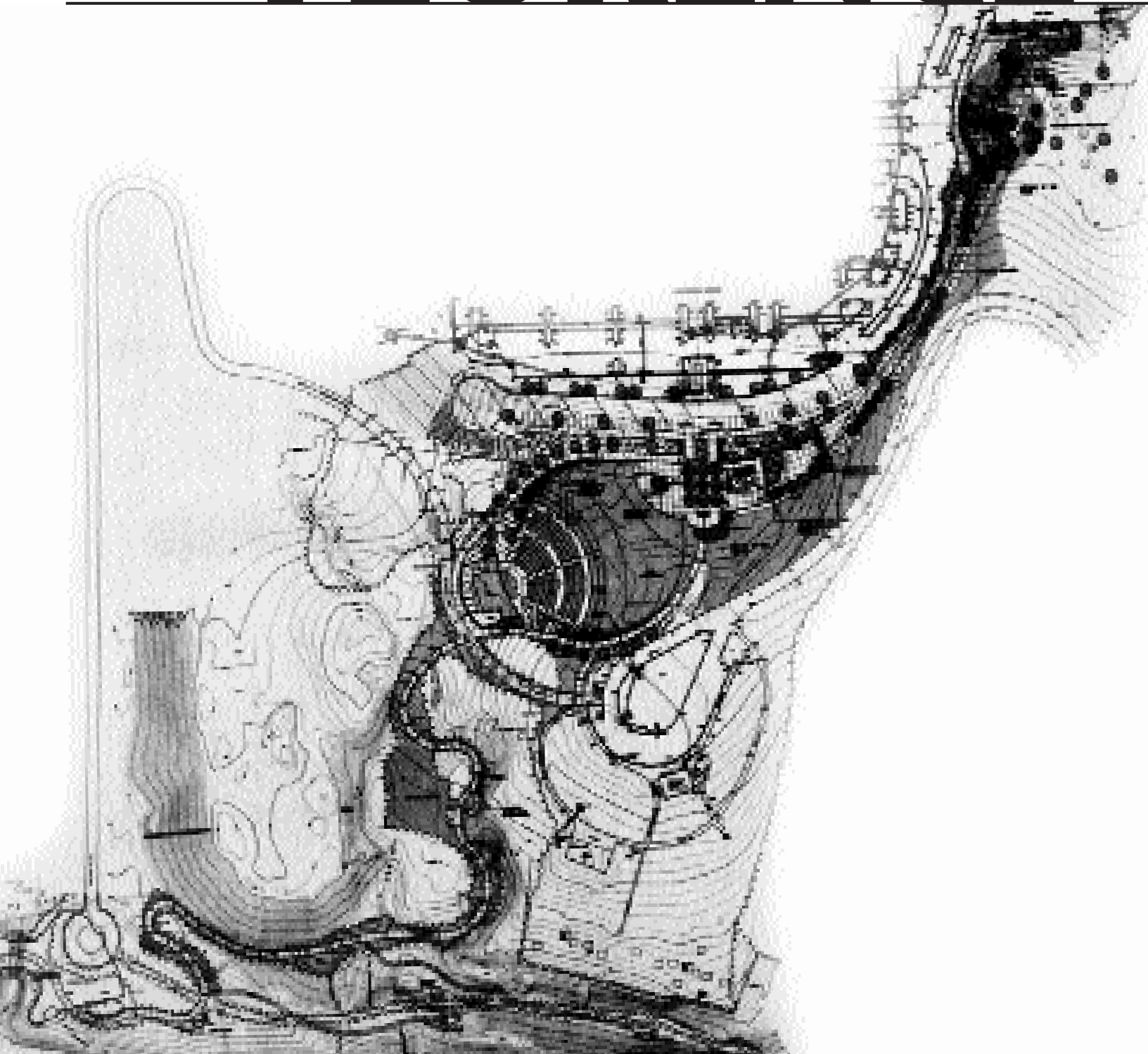
*New Horizon Community Theatre*

#### WETUMPKA

*Wetumpka Depot Players*

*The Riverbank Renaissance of*  
**FLORENCE**

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## *The Tennessee River was the magnet that brought people to this area.*

**P**eople from all over the world came here because there was a possibility of accumulating wealth, directly or indirectly, from the river, said writer and historian Milly Wright. Wright outlined the progression of settlers who cultivated crops, used forest products, developed shipping and trade, and manufacturing operations powered by the falls. Even earlier—thousands of years ago—native Americans enjoyed the area's wealth, hunting, fishing and gathering mussels for food.

Wright emphasizes a tradition of arts and crafts in the area. "In the ranks of the area's small farmers were excellent wood workers and craftspeople," she said. "They made their own furniture. Later industries like wagon manufacturing, iron foundries and potteries, used their talents." Both Florence and Tuscumbia were very lively places. After 1826 when Florence was incorporated, the city fathers were continually licensing establishments for various forms of entertainment. There were horse races, musical programs, lectures, cricket, magic shows, circus-es, camp meetings, dances. On a slightly higher plane were the private lending libraries and study clubs. "In many ways, this was a cultured, educated, well-to-do community," she said.

### **Time Passes, the River Rolls On**

Ferdinand Sannoner, the city's original surveyor, named Florence after his Italian hometown. By legislative act, Florence has been dubbed the Renaissance City. Just as there was

a sudden burst of creativity in 15th century Europe, Florence, Alabama, is undergoing a cultural transformation. Fresh ideas are expressed in the banking and retail centers, the University and medical center, the Kennedy-Douglas Art Center and in cultural events such as the W.C. Handy Festival, community theatre and concert series. The Renaissance Complex, with a newly-constructed \$8 million conference center, and the 350-foot high Renaissance Tower are the 20th century commercial equivalent of early cathedrals.

Rediscovery is part of the renaissance experience that aptly describes the culture of Florence. The city is reexamining its urban edge, the Tennessee River. This is a major natural resource, and there is great potential for incorporating the river into more community experiences.

"Friday night at the river is traditional for the W.C. Handy Festival and several other events," said Barbara Broach, director of arts

**Editor's Note:** Communities constantly re-create themselves; the image of their built environments reflect changing community values and priorities. With a dynamic plan for redeveloping its riverfront, Florence is rediscovering its history and "making itself an art form," said city planner Barry Broach. Community members have different opinions on the artistic, political and financial issues at stake, but Broach believes that in the arts there are many solutions, many options and "when you give people options, they can express themselves and find their own will and way."

by  
**BARRY BROACH**

**Barry Broach is director of planning for the City of Florence, which received the 1996 Alabama Chapter of the American Planning Association Award for the best planning effort in the state.**



**Above: The cheerful splash of a fountain accompanies Arts Alive activities. Below: Crowds and musicians celebrate "the father of the blues" at the W.C. Handy Festival.**

*Florence has  
been designated  
one of America's  
"most liveable"  
cities.*

and museums for the city. She described an outdoor art show and the Festival of Singing Rivers. "One year at Singing Rivers, a Native American woman sang a song that said that if we will be quiet and listen, we can hear Mother Earth and Father Sky. Hearing that message while standing by the river gave me a strong feeling that we must pass on that appreciation for natural things to the next generation."

### **The City Returns to the River, Its Source**

The riverfront plan for Florence reflects appreciation for the course of the river through history and geology. It highlights existing structures and others long since destroyed, tying them together with footpaths and bike trails.

The concept created by Mayor Eddie Frost was to "formulate a plan for the development of the river's cultural and natural resources to the economic and environmental benefit of its citizens." The River Heritage Committee was formed to design a program that would achieve this concept. The initial effort of the committee was to survey the area by walking the banks and boating the waterway. The survey identified primary components of the riverfront, natural and

manmade, for both positive and negative effects. These natural and cultural resources have been perceived in the past as separate entities, with no thought for relating them as parts of a whole.

The primary deficiency identified was lack of access to the water. The positive resources were numerous: an ecologically rich tributary, a recreational park area, a borrow pit being used as a boat launch, a steel span bridge, an Indian mound dated earlier than 800 A.D., barge terminal, canal, proposed new bridge spanning the canal and river, and, finally, the shoals which form the granite stone foundation for Wilson Dam with the Renaissance Complex above.

It was discovered that the topography forming the canal and river between the dam and the tributary, 3.5 miles downstream, was constant. With no rise or fall in the elevation, it would be perfect for a walking trail that would tie the different activity areas together. Emphasis would be placed on the steel span bridge as the entranceway to the city, it was decided. These two anchors would be connected by the trail.

The design problem associated with the Complex was that the conference center and the tower did not connect visually. The proposed solution was a fountain which would act as the focal point of the visual axis between the conference center, Renaissance Tower and the starting point of the trail. The fountain evoked the fountains of Italy and was designed to replicate moving waters of the Shoals and Wilson Dam.

It had already been decided that, for continuity, the conference center design would repeat the architectural motif of the dam and fortress-like powerhouse designed by the Department of War in the 1900's. This concept worked fine; it successfully integrated the conference center structure with the site and environs.

A plaza was chosen as the design connector between the center, tower and fountain, pulling



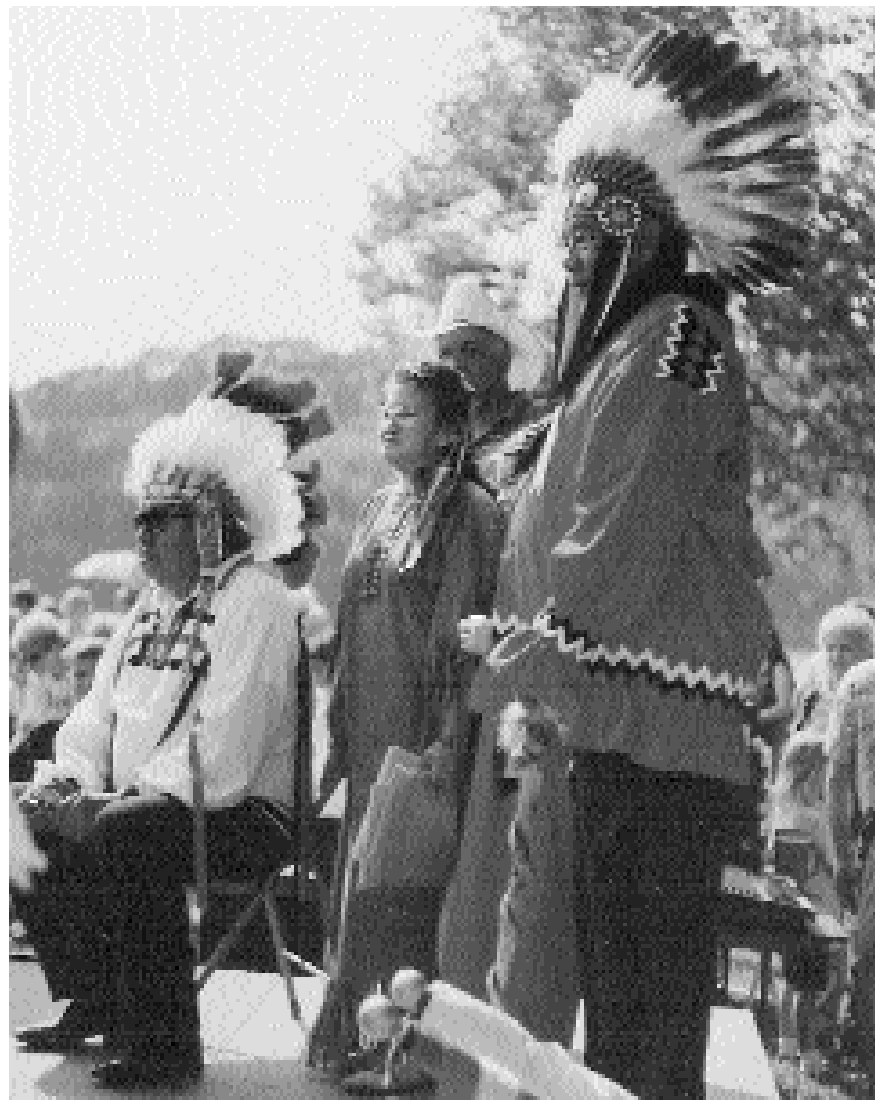
## *Planners say Florence needs an attractive harbor that is a center of activity and a gateway to the city.*

these architectural elements together. A system of pergolas along the plaza will display the history of river navigation, Indian culture and the city. A natural depression adjoining the plaza will develop as an amphitheater. Here the walkway starts meandering through a flower meadow traversing a 96-foot drop (handicapped accessible) to the canal. The riverwalk is level downstream from this point on to the western anchor at the bridge.

Construction has begun on the western anchor at the boat ramp. Dredged and ripped, the project has been renamed Florence Harbor and improved for boating at a cost of a little over \$2 million. Another \$2.5 million is proposed to create an environment for individual and family use. The harbor project starts underneath the steel O'Neal Bridge, with a concrete embankment for fishing, a children's playground and a display explaining the history of the bluffs across the river. There will be a tall ship's mast displaying various flags. Directly across the harbor a beacon continues the theme. These two design elements identify the city entrance—from the land and from the water. Private sector funding is planned to develop a harbor marina. All of these elements are to be connected with a hard surface walkway with sitting areas and landscaping.

A third project, now in the design stage, is an overlook at the new Patton Island Bridge crossing, centered between the harbor and the conference center complex. There will be an area for parking, handicapped access and a river-walk connection to the Patton Island Bridge pedestrian lane. This lane crosses the Tennessee River and will connect to the TVA trail system on the southern bank.

Big plans, big projects. That means big budgets, too. Is there a political will and a way to achieve them? Will it all hang together. Only time, and the river, will tell.



**The Tennessee River is a perfect backdrop for the Festival of Singing Rivers.**

# COMMUNITY ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

ALEXANDER CITY ARTS INC.  
*Alexander City*

ANNISTON COUNCIL ON THE ARTS  
*Anniston*

ARTS COUNCIL OF MONTGOMERY  
*Montgomery*

ARTS COUNCIL OF PICKENS COUNTY  
*Carrollton*

ARTS COUNCIL OF TUSCALOOSA  
*Tuscaloosa*

ARTS COUNCIL TRUSSVILLE AREA  
*Trussville*

THE ARTS COUNCIL  
*Huntsville*

ATHENS LIMESTONE COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL  
*Athens*

ATMORE ARTS COUNCIL  
*Atmore*

AUBURN ARTS ASSOCIATION  
*Auburn*

AUTAUGA COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL  
*Prattville*

BIG WILLS ARTS COUNCIL  
*Fort Payne*

BREWTON COUNCIL OF THE ARTS  
*Brewton*

BULLOCK COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL  
*Union Springs*

CHOCTAW COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL  
*Butler*

CLAY COUNTY ARTS & CRAFTS LEAGUE  
*Ashland*

CLEBURNE COUNTY ARTS/CRAFTS LEAGUE  
*Heflin*

COFFEE COUNTY ARTS ALLIANCE  
*Enterprise*

COLEMAN CENTER  
*York*

CONECUH ARTS COUNCIL  
*Evergreen*

CULLMAN ARTS COUNCIL  
*Cullman*

CULTURAL CENTER OF WIREGRASS  
*Daleville*

DALE COUNTY COUNCIL OF THE ARTS  
*Ozark*

DECATUR ARTS COUNCIL  
*Decatur*

DEMOPOLIS ARTS COMMITTEE  
*Demopolis*

EUFAULA ARTS COUNCIL  
*Eufaula*

FAYETTE ARTS COUNCIL  
*Fayette*

FORT DEPOSIT ARTS COUNCIL  
*Fort Deposit*

FRANKLIN COUNTY ARTS/HUMANITIES COUNCIL  
*Russellville*

GORDO ARTS/HUMANITIES COUNCIL  
*Gordo*

GREATER BESSEMER ARTS ASSN  
*Bessemer*

GREENE COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL  
*Eutaw*

GREENVILLE AREA ARTS COUNCIL  
*Greenville*

GULF COAST ARTS COUNCIL  
*Gulf Shores*

HALE COUNTY COUNCIL ON THE ARTS  
*Greensboro*

HOUSTON COUNTY ARTS & HUMANITIES  
*Dothan*

HURTSBORO COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS  
*Hurtsboro*

JACKSON COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL  
*Scottsboro*

JACKSONVILLE ARTS COUNCIL  
*Jacksonville*

LAWRENCE COUNTY CULTURAL ARTS ASSOCIATION  
*Moulton*

LEEDS ARTS COUNCIL, INC.  
*Leeds*

MCCRANEY-COTTLE ARTS COUNCIL  
*Tallassee*

THE MOBILE ARTS COUNCIL  
*Mobile*

MOUNTAIN BROOK ARTS COUNCIL  
*Mountain Brook*

MOUNTAIN VALLEY ARTS COUNCIL  
*Guntersville*

NORTH ARTS COUNCIL  
*Mount Olive*

NORTH BALDWIN ARTS COUNCIL  
*Bay Minette*

OPELIKA ARTS ASSOCIATION  
*Opelika*

OPP ARTS COUNCIL  
*Opp*

OXFORD ARTS COUNCIL  
*Oxford*

PERRY COUNTY ARTS/HUMANITIES  
*Marion*

RANDOLPH COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL  
*Wedowee*

SOUTHEAST ALABAMA REGIONAL ARTS ALLIANCE  
*Dothan*

SUMTER COUNTY FINE ARTS COUNCIL  
*Livingston*

SYLACAUGA AREA ARTS COUNCIL  
*Sylacauga*

TENNESSEE VALLEY ART ASSOCIATION  
*Tuscumbia*

TROY COUNCIL ON THE ARTS/HUMANITIES  
*Troy*

URIAH ARTS COUNCIL  
*Uriah*

WALKER COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL  
*Jasper*

WASHINGTON COUNTY ARTS & CRAFTS  
*Chatom*

For more information, contact Randy Shoults, Community Development Program Manager, 334/242-4076, ext. 224.

# Exhibition Schedule

## Alabama Artists Gallery

**November 6 - January 8**

**Image and Symbol:**

Expressions of Cultural Identity

**January 15 - March 26**

**Passages**

An Art Journey in Alabama

**April 3 - April 24**

**Visual Art Achievement**

A Showcase of Award-Winning Work by Middle and High School Students in Alabama

The Alabama Artists Gallery, located at the offices of the Alabama State Council on the Arts in the RSA Tower in downtown Montgomery, provides an on-going showcase of the work of Alabama artists in all media.